

Love the Workspace

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## Abstract

The traditional office has evolved dramatically with new technological advancements. Office space concepts have grown and changed over time. Throughout the course of this paper, we will dive into the ideal workspace. For example, collaborative thinking is typically paired with open office plans that force people to communicate and be close to one another. A more private and traditional office cube can provide a feeling of trust and empowerment for the employee. In order to fully understand which type of changes and improvements are needed for a company's workspace, supervisors must first understand how their employees view their workspace and identify any key barriers to satisfaction and better performance. These key barriers can include physical changes while others may be empowerment and perceived control. Several companies, from various industries, have conversed with their employees and are beginning to take steps towards improving their employees' workspaces.

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## Process Analysis Statement

When I began to think about my career in the corporate society, panic began to settle in as I thought of a bland room with tall cubicle walls. At the same time, I also felt small when I considered being placed in a large open space with several of my peers where we could be observed and compared side-by-side. This sparked my interest in finding the ideal workspace environment and how a company could achieve that. After observing many different classmates, I could see that the “ideal” workplace could vary based on the individual, occupation, and personality. An example includes: what an accountant might prefer could vary to the type of workspace a medical professional would prefer. I began to research how a company can decipher what type of structures, colors, and privacy levels individuals need in order work at a high efficiency rate while also maintaining satisfaction within their roles. Individuals spend the majority of their waking hours during the week at an occupation. It is important to provide all employees with the tools and workspaces that inspire them and bring opportunities. There are countless books and videos on finding an inspirational job or how to get through the “grind” every day. Even if a person’s job is not what inspires them every day, why do we need to feel as though our work is not enjoyable or uncomfortable? Many people will make decisions based on salary, but many others will also be impacted by the people they work with and the environment they experience.

After researching how the office has evolved throughout time, I was able to begin researching how companies have begun to cater to their employees’ needs and what helps boost overall productivity. When I was able to understand how this varies company to company, I created questions that a company could utilize. These questions create a survey for employees to take in order to give a company an accurate picture of what needs to change and how their

current space is impacting the people that make up their firm. This is to help them understand in what areas change needs to occur and what areas have served their company well. Following the survey includes a section on how to make changes happen, and examples of two companies that made changes to improve their employees' satisfaction and productivity.

This project has shown me that I learn best through examples and tangible experience. Reading through research on specific aspects of the office such as air quality, although useful, was not what kept me inspired throughout this process. I enjoyed learning about different companies that utilized their employees to provide the best workspaces. Learning about the historical office settings also provided key insight on the cyclical nature of office fads. This helped me realize that all individuals are unique even within a similar job function and providing variety in workspaces is important for job satisfaction and productivity.

## Love the Workspace

There are several different variations of what an ideal workplace should look like. Depending on the type of field employees are working in, some may feel that privacy is important, while others may prefer to work in more open and collaborative locations. The kind of office may also depend on the individual and their personality rather than the type of work they are performing. Regardless of the type of work, what may be most important of all is the feeling of control and empowerment in the workplace. This feeling can be fostered when individuals feel as if they can make changes happen, that their opinions are heard, and that their employers care. Despite whether the workplace needs an empowerment change or a tangible remodel, employers need to listen to their employees' workspace necessities in order to perform better and have better productivity in the workplace.

In the industrial age, the office consisted of an open floor plan with an office for the superior. The superior office created a lot of tension as employees felt they were constantly being watched and scrutinized. This led to the belief that employers did not trust their employees and privacy was hard to come by (see figure 1). Additionally, prior to the computer, the need for large desks and ways to hide cords was not as prevalent. This made the open concept more feasible.

Figure 1



*The Steelcase Coordinated Office Approach* by Stephen Coles. From *Fortune Magazine* (2009), <http://midcenturymodernist.com/2009/culture/ephemera/the-steelcase-coordinated-office-approach/>.

Then the computer was introduced and desks and cubicles made their debut in 1968 (see figure 2). The creator of this three-walled option for employees was Robert Prost, a worker for Herman Miller who specialized in office furniture (Saval). Miller believed that each individual should be allowed to work in private but understood individual offices with doors would not be feasible in every workspace. This was why he designed the three-walled office and which has since become a staple in the business world. What some may dislike today was highly praised and valued in the 1970s. The want for privacy originated when many European companies began rejecting open office plans in favor of giving everyone the opportunity for office space (Saval). The European office was a symbol of trust, individualism, and innovative accomplishments.

Figure 2



“A Brief History of the Dreaded Office Cubicle” by Niki Saval. From *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, 2014), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-dreaded-office-cubicle-1399681972>.

Unfortunately, like many fads, the excitement of the cubicle came to an end towards the late 1990s. With the technology boom, the “open concept” once again became the desired office look (see figure 3). With a new desire and need for collaboration and increased team efforts, the open concept was a must. This forced employees to collide within the workspace more often and allowed more face-to-face interactions. These interactions were designed to help improve innovative thinking and generate new ideas for the company and their technology. As computers improved and wireless internet was created, the popularity of laptops and tablets rose to new heights causing a need for offices became less pronounced. Individuals began taking their work with them wherever they walked.



Figure 3



“A Look at Office Space Design Through the Years.” From VIP Structures Blog (VIP Structures 2017), <http://blog.vipstructures.com/a-look-at-office-space-design-through-the-years/>.

Looking at today, the removal of cubicle walls and the rise of remote workers has been a great money-saver for many companies. The problem with open workspaces now, however, is that employers are cramming more employees into smaller spaces and the total square feet per worker is shrinking as well. When cubicle walls come down, it feels unnecessary to have the same square footage per person. This is resulting in a retraction of the open concept and the desire for private workspaces is increasing in popularity once more. As companies realize this, a common thread today is that there is no “right” workspace and many firms are moving towards a design mix within their building spaces. This is to help fit all needs and preferences. An example of this is a mixture of individual work pods, huts for two to three individuals to meet, and rooms to hold medium to large sized group meetings. Ultimately, the furniture is not the sole driver of productivity or satisfaction in the workplace. It is often “how the furniture represents the

arbitrariness of power in the workplace” (Saval). This is asking the question: are best furniture and designs available to all employees or just top tier workers?

The mix of office furniture types and space is growing because employers are determining that different people need a variety of options. One common myth that has been popular in the past several years is that open concept offices are great for everyone. In fact, unless the work is truly a collaborative effort in every respect, an open concept can be distracting to many and lead the employees to a lack of privacy and a feeling of being micromanaged. Another myth is that cubicles are great for everyone when for some, an open concept can speed along collaboration and innovating thinking. As we can see, any extreme assumption that acts as a blanket statement for all is never reliable, even within specific lines of work. The focus needs to shift from a company’s office layout to the individual needs of their employees. An additional myth is that windows are most important, when a study suggests that the amount of workspace available to an employee is more important than any windows or natural lighting (Tomovska-Misoka et al. 161). This is not true for everyone but having more space available to work in may support better productivity and happiness within the office.

In general, most people want to have the best office for their employees, or at the very least, themselves. Studies suggest that the physical work environment only accounts for 24% of overall job satisfaction (Tomovska-Misoka et al. 161). Although this is less than 1/3 of their satisfaction, changing the physical work environment can be one of the easiest ways to impact job satisfaction and productivity. Some of the top factors affecting the physical environment include: natural lighting, windows, quality of air, and temperature. The article “The Impact of Office Design on Business Performance” discusses how workplace satisfaction, organizational culture and design all have an impact on turnover rates within organizations (8). Companies will

need to assess their current workspace and define the types of offices, common spaces, and amenities they have available and then ask their employees how this is impacting their day-to-day activities. Greater efficiency brings greater rewards to business: higher productivity, faster results, etc. (“Impact of Office Design” 12).

There are two ways to analyze an office space. First, its effectiveness, or “value added by design to business performance” (“Impact of Office Design 3). Second, expression, or the success in broadcasting business values externally and internally. The first can be analyzed by the overall productivity, speed, and accuracy of employees’ work. The second is the energy put out by managers and employees. This can be felt but also measured by sending out a satisfaction survey and communicating with employees that the company cares and wants to improve. Once the company experiences positivity, the synergy created can be shared and discussed externally with suppliers, buyers, and investors if applicable.

Determining whether the physical environment must change or if there is another underlying factor to be considered is key when analyzing employee responses. There is a difference between satisfaction with the environment employees have been given and having a need for control within their environment. When an individual feels as though they are empowered and have the ability to make necessary changes, they will often be more satisfied with their work environment. If a person believes they chose their surroundings or knows they can change them if they need or want to, they will believe in their own empowerment. This empowerment stems from the belief that their superiors trust their employees’ decisions and will provide for them. This leads to better satisfaction which often turns into better productivity. The survey will be used to determine if the employees’ needs change in their physical environment. The survey will also show if employees need to feel empowered and as though they have the

ability to make change happen. This is key if a company wishes to move forward with satisfied employees.

Actual full control over the situation is not always necessary but employees' perceived sense of control is more important. Increased managerial control of the office space was found to be associated with reduced psychological comfort (Knight et al. 728). This may be correlated to an open office plan if the employees are not empowered and feel as though they are being observed. Additionally, an increased sense of control over the office space was positively correlated with happiness. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs allows us to analyze human's basic requirements for living. This hierarchy includes basic, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs. Each tier cannot be reached until the previous is satisfied, starting with basic needs. These basic needs include food, water, and security (McLeod). One of the most important factors is safety as a key element which is associated with trust. All of this is concerned with the person's ability to control their surroundings.

The purpose of the survey is to determine whether employees' expectations are being met. If they are not, the survey will be able to show if the problem is due to a lack of control of their workspace or the physical work environment itself. One of the original office designs had individual desks, but included an open office plan in order to boost collaboration. After privacy became more valued, the cubicle was introduced. The reason for this was to allow for more privacy, trust, and control of individual workstations. The final image includes a more modern take which is incorporated in many technology companies today. This is to allow the employees to take breaks, sit where they would like, and accomplish their tasks with energy.

When looking at what factors may primarily affect the productivity of employees, there are a few that are prominent. Sound and background noise in the workplace, types of lighting and

window availability, as well as location of workspace and overall privacy are key factors. When creating a survey for companies to utilize, these are going to be the focus for the results to see if those aspects need changes. These preferences may change from individual to individual, but the overall responses should be similar depending on the type of work that is being performed by the group in question.

Lighting and windows are aspects people strive for in their workplace including getting the corner office with the great view. That being said, will having a window truly boost productivity or is it the idea of striving for the corner office something that will actually improve productivity along the way? Natural lighting has always been the overarching preference of people due to the desire for the outdoors and the requirement to stay inside for the majority of the day. If natural lighting is not an option, what type of lighting should be used? According to “User Acceptance Studies for LED Office Lighting: Lamp Spectrum, Spatial Brightness and Illuminance,” a study analyzing the productivity and preferences of users under florescent and different variations of LED lighting, “people prefer a lighting environment which looks bright” (55). They also discovered that it is more important that the employees feel they can perform well, and “feel comfortable and accept the lit environment of the entire room at the specific illuminance” (Islam et al. 55). Lighting preferences may vary from person to person as long as they feel as though they are able to adapt to it and be in control of what the lighting looks like. Bright lights may spark productivity and satisfaction but warmer toned lights may also do well in the long term as it can help prevent damage to the eyes.

The impact of noise in the environment is paramount as it can strongly hinder certain individuals from completing tasks to the best of their ability. In the article “Relating Human Productivity and Annoyance to Indoor Noise and Criteria Systems: A Low Frequency Analysis,”

the type of noise and increased volume lead to a correlation between a decrease in speed and accuracy as well as “the time required to complete the proofreading tasks increased” (Bowden et al. 689). This study shows that the louder the surrounding noise volume is, the longer it can take individuals to complete tasks. Additionally, once the tasks are completed, proofing the products takes more time. If workers do not have control over the volume of their workplace, what they can listen to, or have a way to create a quiet private work environment, their performance could potentially be hindered.

The location of an employee in comparison to their business partners can be a key factor to how fast and accurately they are able to complete their work. Utilizing more technology does not always lead to more productivity as individuals may prefer face-to-face interaction with their business partners. Using technology can result in unclear messages being sent, whereas closeness to other members in their team may provide morale, and efficiency in their overall production.

Privacy is key to employee performance success. If an employee feels as though they are being watched or their employer does not trust their skills and abilities, then they will most likely not believe in themselves, take initiative, or fine-tune their processes. Without trust, cooperation and encouragement is stagnant. In the article “The Influence of [Organizational] Rewards on Workplace Trust and Work Engagement” trust “allows for the encouragement of information sharing... problem-solving and conflict resolution, which leads to better [organizational] performance” (4). More trust shown in the workplace leads to increased work engagement and, therefore, improved employee production and satisfaction. The need for privacy led to the cubicle which may have allowed employees to feel empowered make their own decisions rather than a focus on the collaborative effort as a whole.

Next we will introduce a set of survey questions designed to help the employer understand whether improvements are related to empowerment or the workspace. The survey also shows details that may need adjusted in the office. Following the questions are some suggestions that can help provide direction for employers utilizing the survey.

## Survey Questions

## General

1. What is your Gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Prefer not to respond
2. What is your age?
  - a. 18 – 22
  - b. 23 – 29
  - c. 30 – 39
  - d. 40 – 49
  - e. 50 – 59
  - f. 60 – 69
  - g. 70 +
3. What is your job level?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
4. How would you describe the typical indoor conditions in your office environment during the past month?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
5. What does the process of changing aspects about your workspace look like?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
6. With 1 being not at all and 7 being all the time, do you feel that you are consulted when changes in the workspace occur?
  - a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7



7. Do you feel that you have the ability to make changes to your workspace?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Please, explain
8. Who do you believe has the power to make changes to your workspace?
  - a. CEO
  - b. VP's
  - c. Managers
  - d. Entry Level
  - e. All of the above
9. Who primarily (>80% of time) makes changes to your workspace?
  - a. CEO
  - b. VP's
  - c. Managers
  - d. Entry Level
  - e. All of the above
10. With 1 being not at all satisfied and 7 being very satisfied, how would you describe your workspace satisfaction?
  - a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. With 1 being not at all satisfied and 7 being very satisfied, how would you describe your job satisfaction?
  - a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

#### Lighting/Windows

1. How many windows are in your workspace?

- a. More than 2
  - b. 2
  - c. 1
  - d. 0
2. How big are the windows in your workspace?
- a. Extra Large
  - b. Large
  - c. Medium
  - d. Small
  - e. Extra Small
  - f. N/A
3. With 1 being dark and 7 being bright, how would you describe the lighting in your workspace?
- a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. With 1 being warm and 7 being harsh, how would you describe the lighting in your workspace?
- a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. Do you have control over the type of lighting in your workspace?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Do you have control over the brightness of the lighting in your workspace?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
7. What does the process of changing the lighting in your workspace look like?

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
8. How long does the process of changing the lighting in your workspace take?
- a. Immediate
  - b. Less than one day
  - c. 1 day
  - d. Several days
  - e. 1 week
  - f. 2-3 weeks
  - g. 1 month+

#### Sound/Noise

1. With 1 being quiet and 7 being loud, how would you describe the noise level in your workspace?
- a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. With 1 being not bothersome and 7 being distracting, how would you describe the noise level in your workspace?
- a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. Do you have control over the noise level around your workspace?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
4. Do you have control over what you listen to in your workspace?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
5. What does the process of changing the sound in your workspace look like?

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
6. How long does the process of changing the sound in your workspace take?
- a. Immediate
  - b. Less than a day
  - c. 1 day
  - d. Couple of days
  - e. 1 week
  - f. 2-3 weeks
  - g. 1 month+

#### Location and Privacy

1. With 1 being close and 7 being far, how would you describe the location of your workspace to the people you interact with to do your job well?
- a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. How would you describe the privacy level of your workspace?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
3. How would you describe the meeting workspace available?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Is there anything else we should know about your workspace?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_

## Suggestions

After employees take the survey, what happens next? Many of the results can be taken at face value or interpreted individually. That being said, there are a few ways a company can make changes if they did not get the results they were hoping for or high praise for the workspaces they are currently providing for their employees.

Questions 6, 7, 8, and 9 in the General section, questions 5-8 in Lighting/Windows, and 3-6 in the Sound/Noise are focused on the empowerment and perceived control of the workspace. Utilizing the scale question when looking at employee consultation allows employers to determine if the employees do not feel that they are consulted (a four or below). The next step, if this is the overarching theme, would include looking at why they do not consult their employees when they make changes to the workspace. If it is a lack of trust, they may need to try giving more responsibility to their employees. Consider incorporating employees in specific areas when their workspaces are being changed and adjusted. Including employees and their opinions helps them feel empowered which will typically lead to more innovative thinking and better employee retention.

A company that has made changes and involves their employees is Steelcase, a producer of office furniture. Steelcase has altered their workspace and has removed assigned desks all together. In the article “The Next Office: CEOs Are Paying Attention,” a financial analyst shares a what a normal day in her workspace is like:

“...each day she chooses one of many shared desks in the open, daylight-filled Finance department, and selects the most appropriate individual and group spaces during the day as her work changes. She and her colleagues, about 75 total, are typical of today’s

knowledge workers: highly connected, mobile, full-time workers doing business in a world that itself is global and mobile, and more unpredictable than ever. Having the right workspace and tools at hand is far more valuable to them than having an assigned desk” (“The Next Office”).

Steelcase has made changes to the workspace that affected not only their technology sector, but traditionally individualized work such as finance. This alteration has worked well for the company. They have taken on more cases and projects than in the past due to increased productivity and collaborative thinking. The changes Steelcase made affected not just one department of their organization, but others as well which had a great impact overall.

If empowerment and control is not an area that needs improvements, it may be time to look at where the company as a whole can improve and how the company should make edits to their space to help foster new approaches more easily. Steelcase did not place their focus on what employees wanted for their office space, but instead placed more weight on how they could best move their company forward. An adjustment period was required to allow employees that do not typically utilize collaborative spaces daily to adapt. Once this period ended, they saw immense improvements to the productivity of their company.

Another example of a company that has made changes according to their employees' need is the Samsung headquarters in San Jose, California. Not only did they provide several amenities in their building, but they placed an emphasis outside of the office as well. This includes a “central atrium and indoor sky pocket parks” as well as a focus on improving their employees' commutes to the office (“Samsung's San Jose Headquarters”). In order to make the best building possible, Samsung reached out to their employees for collaboration and suggestions

for the design. This company selectively created spaces that encourage collaboration and movement within the vertical layers of the building space rather than cutting each floor off from one another. All the while, they incorporated their employee's opinions and ideas to improve their workspace.

This example shows how a company recognized that their employees needed to feel empowered to make changes happen. Since Samsung would be creating a new building, they chose to incorporate their employees' ideas and put those into action. One of the comments many employees gave was that there was a division between the different floors of their previous building. If a department or individual was on the fourth floor, the chances that they would spend any time talking or seeing others from the eighth floor was minimal at best. By creating the pocket playground and open stairs every two to three floors, interactions and collaboration during work became more common. The new building also allowed for the public to join the company on the main floor for food and activities which helped the overall atmosphere less intimidating.

If a company did not receive positive feedback in certain areas, this provides them with an opportunity to make adjustments based on their employee's responses. This may include providing more collaborative workspace or functional private pods for independent work. Each company and their employees may vary. Taking the time to have their employees' voices be heard and acting upon what needs to be fixed is a tool that companies have at their disposal, they just need to take the time to listen and respond.

Although the ideal workplace can vary drastically by individual and the type of work, there is still an opportunity for firms to do their part to improve the workspace and help boost productivity. Including quiet places that provide privacy but also incorporating open areas that

allow for collaboration may play an important factor. When looking past the type of work individuals are performing, the need for control and empowerment may need to be a priority above the physical workspace itself. Empowerment and control can be created when individuals believe they have the ability to make changes, starting with the tangible area around them. The most important part of change in the workplace is that employer's listen to and consider what their employees need.



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